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Men, Women and Stress

Imagine that it is the end of a long and trying day at work. Arriving home and feeling stressed, you choose one of the following behaviors to help you unwind:

- A. You find your kids, talk to them about the day and help them do their homework;
or
- B. You grab the newspaper to spend a few minutes alone to read and relax.

Which activity would you choose as a stress reducer? If you are a woman, you are more likely to choose activity A; if you are a man, you would likely choose activity B.

Why? Men are more likely to exhibit a "fight-or-flight" response. A fight-or-flight response is a physical and mental preparation for running or defending oneself; typically it includes an elevated heartbeat and blood pressure, and a rush of blood to the muscles. People experiencing fight-or-flight generally want to be alone, and may become irritable and aggressive if forced to be around others.

Instead, women under stress demonstrate a "tend-and-befriend" response, where less aggression and more affection are exhibited. Psychological researchers feel female hormones may be the reason why women react so differently from men while in similar circumstances. Women have more of the hormone *oxytocin*. This hormone is necessary for nursing, but also promotes social feelings while decreasing anxiety. Men, when under stress, produce more testosterone, a hormone that can promote hostility and aggression.

Neither way of handling stress is a better way: each is an inborn, hormonal response that you either do or do not have.

Contributed by Dr. Edward Hallowell

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